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Stesichorus and Greek Tragedy

P. J. Finglass

In Athens of the fifth century [Stesichorus] was universally known . . . There was scarcely a poet then living who was not influenced by [him], scarcely a poet who did not, consciously or unconsciously, represent his version of the great sagas. In tracing the historical development of any myth, research almost always finds in Stêsichorus the main bridge between the earliest remains of the story and the form it has in tragedy or in the late epos. In the Agamemnon legend, for instance, the concentration of the interest upon Clytaemnestra, which makes the story a true tragedy instead of an ordinary tale of blood-feud, is his; Clytaemnestra's dream of giving suck to a serpent is his; the conscience-mad Orestes is probably his; so are many of the details of the sack of Troy, among them, if the tradition is right, the flight of Aeneas to Italy. This is enough to show that Stesichorus was a creative genius of a very high order.

Thus Gilbert Murray, writing more than half a century before the first papyri of Stesichorus were published.¹ He is not the only scholar to emphasise the importance of Stesichorus for Greek tragedy. Writing in 1888, Mayer asked 'how little of the plot of that most splendid trilogy, the *Oresteia*, would be left, if we took away what comes

I am grateful to the organisers of the 'Paths of Song' conference for the invitation to speak there; this chapter is a lightly revised version of my text delivered on that occasion. I am grateful to the editors and to Dr Henry Spelman for helpful comments; and to the AHRC for the award of a Research Fellowship for the academic year 2012–13, during which this paper was written.

¹ Murray 1897, 103–4.

from Stesichorus?’² Wilamowitz made a more general point, saying ‘I have myself long shared the belief that Stesichorus, alone of all the lyric poets, had a significant influence on the development of heroic myth’.³ And that influence will have been mediated mainly through tragedy. Indeed, Wilamowitz elsewhere remarked that ‘tragedy cast a shadow over all narrative lyric’,⁴ which is another way of asserting the close connexion between these two genres: so close (in his view) that the popularity of tragedy led to the relative neglect of the lyric poetry which had had such a powerful influence on it. Similar views about the impressive legacy of Stesichorus⁵ have been expressed since the arrival of the papyri, published between 1956 and 1990, that have yielded so many new fragments of his works.⁶ Stephanopoulos refers to his ‘great influence on tragedy’;⁷ Haslam remarks that ‘his importance for tragedy, both in its nascent and in its developed stages, is great and multifarious’.⁸ For

² Mayer 1883, 4: ‘quantulum relinquitur de Orestiae nobilissimae trilogiae argumento, dempto exemplo Stesichoreo?’

³ Wilamowitz 1913, 241: ‘Ich habe selbst den Glauben lange geteilt, dass Stesichoros, allein von allen Lyrikern, einen bedeutenden Einfluss auf die Ausbildung der Heldensage gehabt hatte.’

⁴ Wilamowitz 1900, 12: ‘Die Tragödie überschattete alle erzählende Lyrik’.

⁵ By contrast, the importance for tragedy of Stesichorus’ fellow-westerner and near-contemporary Ibycus has received less attention; see however Ucciardello 2005 25–7 for some possible links.

⁶ For a list and discussion of the papyri see Finglass 2014a, 73–6, Finglass and Kelly 2015b, 4–13.

⁷ Stephanopoulos 1980, 18: ‘was Stesichoros ferner eine besondere Stellung gibt, ist seiner großer Einfluß auf die Tragödie’.

⁸ Haslam 1978, 30.

Arrighetti, the very subject is somewhat passé, a commonplace of modern (and ancient) scholarship.⁹ How true is all this?¹⁰

Stesichorus was certainly familiar to theatrical audiences in fifth-century Athens.¹¹ Aristophanes extensively interacts with his *Oresteia* in one of the lyrics in his *Peace* of 421. There Aristophanes' chorus sing

Μοῦσα, σὺ μὲν πολέμους
ἀπωσαμένη μετ' ἐμοῦ
τοῦ φίλου χόρευσον,
κλείουσα θεῶν τε γάμους
ἀνδρῶν τε δαῖτας
καὶ θαλίας μακάρων.

Muse, reject wars and dance with me, your friend, celebrating the marriages of the gods, the feasts of men, and the banquets of the blessed

Ar. *Pax* 775–80

The scholia on this passage tell us that this passage is 'Stesichorean', which has encouraged editors of Stesichorus to reconstruct a fragment of his poetry, as follows:

Μοῖσα σὺ μὲν πολέμους ἀπωσαμένα πεδ' ἐμοῦ
κλείοισα θεῶν τε γάμους ἀνδρῶν τε δαῖτας
καὶ θαλίας μακάρων

⁹ Arrighetti 1994, 15–16 n. 15: 'non torniamo a trattare della caratteristica di Stesicoro come anticipatore della poesia tragica, un tratto ben individuato da molta critica moderna e che un attento esame delle fonti rivela già percepito anche dagli antichi'.

¹⁰ For another attempt to answer this question, which reaches similar conclusions via different paths, see Swift 2015.

¹¹ See Ercoles and Fiorentini 2011, 21–3.

Muse, rejecting wars with me, celebrating the weddings of gods, the feasts of men,
and the banquets of the blessed . . .

Stes. fr. 172 F.¹²

We encounter slightly later in *Peace* another passage, which corresponds metrically to the one cited above:

τοιάδε χρὴ Χαρίτων
δαμώματα καλλικόμων
τὸν σοφὸν ποιητὴν
ὕμνεϊν ὅταν ἡρινὰ μὲν
φωνῇι χελιδῶν
ἐζομένη¹³ κελαδῇι

Such are the songs of the fair-tressed Graces that the good poet must sing, when in the spring the swallow sits and sings out with its voice.

Ar. *Pax* 775–80

This passage too has a scholion which cites the following fragment as its model, and specifies that the lines in question come from Stesichorus' *Oresteia*:

τοιάδε χρὴ Χαρίτων δαμώματα καλλικόμων
ὕμνεϊν Φρύγιον μέλος ἐξευρόντα<c> ἄβρῶς
ἦρος ἐπερχομένου.

Such are the songs of the fair-tressed Graces that we must sing, devising a Phrygian melody in refined comfort, at spring's approach.

¹² References to Stesichorus are taken from my edition, Finglass 2014b; for an account of that edition and its aims see Finglass and Kelly 2015b, Finglass 2018a ≈ 2018b.

¹³ I print ἐζομένη, the reading of the mediaeval manuscripts, not ἡδομένη, the reading of the ancient manuscript and almost certainly what Aristophanes actually wrote, because ἐζομένη was probably the text known to the writer(s) of the scholia.

These lines provide the metre for what would otherwise be an excessively confident reconstruction of Stesichorus' text in fr. 172. The scholia to Aristophanes go on to cite a further passage from Stesichorus on which Aristophanes is drawing:

ὄκα ἦρος
ὥραι κελαδῆι χελιδών.

when the swallow sounds in spring-time

In the case of the latter two fragments, we can be sure, and in the case of the first, can reasonably infer, that Aristophanes' text is extremely close to that of Stesichorus. Not all Aristophanes' audience will have recognised the allusion; as Hadjimichael points out, Aristophanes in his citations generally requires his audience to recognise that lyric poetry is at issue, but not necessarily the name of the poet.¹⁴ But Aristophanes would hardly have put in an allusion that no-one was going to appreciate. Some people would have recognised that it came from Stesichorus' *Oresteia*; others that it recalled to a piece of Stesichorus, forgetting the precise poem; others that it alluded to a piece of archaic lyric, without knowing the name of the author; and others would have missed everything and simply enjoyed the song. No doubt the last group was substantial, but the other groups would have been far from negligible. Some people who missed this particular lyric allusion will have picked up on others, and vice versa; we should not think of an intellectually segregated audience, some people getting

¹⁴ Hadjimichael 2011, 92–6.

everything, and the rest nothing at all. And the audience for comedy was the same as the audience for tragedy.

How would the audience members of fifth-century tragedy have encountered Stesichorus' poetry? Opportunities at Athens to perform Stesichorus in full, chorus and all, may have been limited or non-existent,¹⁵ but the symposium was a potential locus for smaller-scale reperformance. Eupolis twice refers to Stesichorus as the subject of symposiastic song, and Stesichorus is associated with the symposium in two other later sources.¹⁶ That institution afforded men the chance to sing extracts from his poems, which would have encouraged the circulation of written texts; men will have wanted to learn their contributions by heart, or to read more of a poet whose songs they first encountered in that convivial environment. These texts would have circulated mainly among the elite, which includes the tragedians, and perhaps some women too. Moreover, to argue for a moment from first principles, it feels intuitively probable that the tragic poets, once they had encountered the Stesichorean corpus, would have availed themselves of the great storehouse of myth that it contained, not least because it was composed in the lyric metres which were so important an antecedent to the tragedians' own verse.

When we sift Stesichorus for these alleged tragic associations, the results are initially discouraging. In terms of verbal echoes, we do not find anything remotely comparable to the Aristophanean passage mentioned above. That may be mere chance – we only know about the allusion in Aristophanes because the scholia happen to tell

¹⁵ See however Bowie 2015 for some exciting, if currently unprovable, hypotheses about the possibility of full performances of Stesichorus' works at various points in Athenian history from the 560s to the 440s.

¹⁶ Eupolis fr. 148 (*Helots*, early 420s?), 395 *PCG*, Σ *Ar. Vesp.* 122a (pp. 192.1–192.3 Koster), Hesych. τ 1343 (p. 71 H–C).

us about it – but we now have quite a bit of Stesichorus, and a fair amount of tragedy, so we might have hoped, at least, for something.¹⁷ Allusions have been alleged, of course. For example, Euripides’ description of Helen as ‘the father-leaver, the marriage-leaver’ (τὰν λιποπάτορα λιπόγαμον)¹⁸ is said to show the influence of Stesichorus; according to Willink, ‘the λιπο– words . . . reflect Stesichorus’ description of Helen and Clytemnestra as λιπεράνορες’.¹⁹ But Helen was most famous for leaving her husband (and daughter) when she sailed to Troy with Paris; words meaning ‘leave’ would come naturally to the mind of poets wishing to describe her, whether or not they knew their Stesichorus.²⁰ If the verbal echo were stronger, that objection might not be absolutely overwhelming, but in fact it is rather weak; Stesichorus uses λιπερ–, which is morphologically distinct from λιπο–.²¹ If Euripides had wanted to make his audience think of the Stesichorean passage, or if he had been subconsciously influenced by it himself, it is hard to see why he should have failed to avail himself of the strikingly Stesichorean stem.

Ercoles and Fiorentini have made a fresh attempt to find verbal connexions between Stesichorus and Euripides, this time between the poem represented by the

¹⁷ Contrast the state of affairs for Stesichorus and epic, where a strong relationship between individual passages can easily be identified in many places; see Kelly 2015. As Peek 1958, 173 asked after the publication of P.Oxy. 2360, one of the first two papyri to be published, ‘who would have suspected that the dependence [sc. of Stesichorus on Homer] could have gone so far in matters of content too? [sc. in addition to the imitation of words and phrases, something already evident from the quoted fragments]’ (‘wer hätte geahnt, daß die Abhängigkeit auch im Stofflichen so weit gehen könnte?’).

¹⁸ Eur. *Or.* 1305. Thus the manuscripts; for the text see Renehan 1998, 257, who rejects West’s λιπογάμ<ετ>ον.

¹⁹ Willink on Eur. *Or.* 1305–6, referring to Stes. fr. 85 F. (‘husband-leavers’).

²⁰ Cf. Sappho fr. 16.6–9 Voigt, Alcaeus fr. 283.3–8, Eur. *Andr.* 602–4, *Or.* 99, *Cycl.* 185–6.

²¹ For λιπ– compounds in general see Hummel 1997.

Lille papyrus²² and *Phoenissae*.²³ When we consider the proposed instances, however, none seems particularly convincing. Their first example concerns the Euripidean Jocasta's prayer in her opening speech

ἀλλ' ὦ φαεινὰς οὐρανοῦ ναίων πτυχάς
Ζεῦ, σῶσον ἡμᾶς, δὸς δὲ σύμβασιν τέκνοισι

But you who dwell in the bright folds of the sky, Zeus, save us, and grant an agreement to my children

Eur. *Phoen.* 84–5

and the Stesichorean Queen's words

τοῦτο γὰρ ἄν, δοκέω, λυτήριον ὕμμι κακοῦ γένοιτο πότμο[υ,
μάντιος φραδαῖσι θείου,
αἴττε νέον Κρονίδας γένος τε καὶ ἄστυ [υ — —
Κάδμου ἄνακτος,
ἀμβάλλων κακότητα πολὺν χρόνον

This, I think, may prove a release from grim fate, as a result of the divine prophet's advice, depending on whether the son of Cronus [will save?]²⁴ the latest offspring and city of lord Cadmus by long delaying the trouble

Stes. fr. 97.225–30

Both women look to Zeus as a potential saviour for their family; but that is not surprising, as appeals to Zeus are common in all kind of desperate situations.

²² Stes. fr. 97 F. (*Thebais*).

²³ Ercoles and Fiorentini (2011, 25–9).

²⁴ Reading *σῶσει* (*suppl.* Barrett, Lloyd-Jones, West *ap.* Meillier 1976, 299).

Moreover (as Ercoles and Fiorentini admit, p. 26), there is no verbal connexion. Nothing suggests that Euripides was influenced by the passage of Stesichorus, or that members of the audience of Euripides' *Phoenissae* would have thought of the Stesichorean lines when they heard Jocasta's speech.²⁵

In their second example, Ercoles and Fiorentini cite *Phoen.* 951–2, where Tiresias tells Creon 'choose one or the other of two fates: save either your son or the city' (τοῖνδ' ἐλοῦ δυοῖν πότμοι | τὸν ἕτερον· ἧ γὰρ παῖδα σῶσον ἢ πόλιν), and claim 'la formulazione dell'alternativa tra il figlio e la città ricorda [Stes. fr. 97.216–17 F.]', where the Queen prays to die before she sees 'her children dying in their halls, or the city captured' (παῖδας ἐνὶ μεγάροις | θανόντας ἢ πόλιν ἀλοῖσαν). The Euripidean passage uses ἢ . . . ἢ in the sense 'aut . . . aut' (Creon can choose to save either his son or his city), whereas in Stesichorus the force of ἢ probably approximates to 'vel' (the Queen does not want to see either her sons die or the city destroyed, but there is no sense that one, and only one, of these things is going to happen). Even if we accept for the sake of argument that Ercoles and Fiorentini are correct to urge that ἢ in Stesichorus means 'aut', that would still be insufficient to establish a connexion. The conflict of loyalties between family and city is familiar in all kinds of archaic and classical poetry; we would need a more substantial similarity to trigger an association in the minds of an audience. Moreover, Creon is being presented with a specific, dreadful choice by Tiresias; in Stesichorus, however, there is no question of the Queen selecting a particular fate. So this example, too, is less than cogent. The remainder that Ercoles and Fiorentini suggest are no more

²⁵ The basic similarity of situation, which goes beyond any specific verbal reminiscence, will be discussed below.

persuasive; they involve the sort of similarities that are inevitable when two poets are dealing with comparable situations.

A fragment of Aeschylus which refers to ‘Himera on its high crag’ (ὑψίκρημνον ἱμέραν) has been taken to show the influence of Stesichorus, the famous poet from that city.²⁶ This is just a guess, however; there is no reference to Himera in what remains of Stesichorus’ work. According to Himerius, Stesichorus celebrated Himera in his lyrics,²⁷ but no trace of encomiastic poetry can be observed in the fragments;²⁸ they contain mythological lyric, and Himera as a relatively recent settlement may not have featured there. Nor did Aeschylus need Stesichorus’ poetry to alert himself to the existence of Himera, a substantial town with close ties to ‘mainland’ Greece.²⁹ Aeschylus may even have visited it on one of his trips to Sicily; he would certainly have heard of it.

The absence of verbal parallels is a pity, but might be the result of chance; a single new papyrus, of Stesichorus or of tragedy, could change the situation dramatically. Let us try a different approach, and look how the mythological range found in Stesichorus’ poetry compares with what is on offer in tragedy. According to the *Suda*, Stesichorus’ works were collected into twenty-six books.³⁰ We have the

²⁶ Aesch. fr. 25a.2 *TrGF*; thus Franco 2008, 20. Cf. Pearson 1975, 188: ‘even if Aeschylus is following Stesichorus when he says Heracles took a bath in the hot springs of Himera, it still does not tell us how or why Heracles came to Himera’.

²⁷ Stes. fr. 299 F.

²⁸ Two apparently encomiastic fragments from P.Oxy. 3876 (Stes. fr. 214, 219 F.) may well not be by Stesichorus; more than one poem, and author, may be represented among the fragments of P.Oxy. 3876, which may even represent more than one papyrus (see Finglass 2014a, 75–7, 2014d, 531–2).

²⁹ See Finglass 2014a, 6–12.

³⁰ Stes. test. Tb2 Ercoles.

titles of thirteen poems. One of these, the *Scylla*, deals with a topic that unsurprisingly does not seem to have received a dedicated tragic treatment – it is hard to see how the moral complications that characterise Greek tragedy could have surfaced in an account of a six-headed monster feasting on Odysseus’ crew.³¹ The subject of Stesichorus’ *Cycnus* was enormously popular in the archaic period, in both poetry and the visual arts,³² but does not seem to have interested the tragedians. Stesichorus’ *Nostoi* (*Returns*) again presents a theme familiar from epic, and in a format that epic favoured – a single work discussing the return of several Greek warriors from Troy.³³ A tragedy, by contrast, will tend to concentrate on an individual. Episodes connected with the return of the Greeks from Troy do occur in tragedy, but our fragments of Stesichorus’ *Nostoi* are too exiguous for us to tell whether they influenced the tragedians. Stesichorus’ *Cerberus* might influenced Sophocles’ play of that name, but since we have barely more than a title for either work, speculation on that matter is unfruitful; similarly with Stesichorus’ *Europa* and Aeschylus’ *Carians* or *Europa*. We have a bit more information, on both sides, for the *Boarhunters*. The tragic relationship between Meleager and Atalanta in myths of the Calydonian boar hunt was handled by Euripides in his *Meleager*, and perhaps by Aeschylus in his *Atalanta* and Sophocles in his *Meleager*; but whether they were reacting against all earlier treatments, or picking up an element first made prominent by Stesichorus, is unknown. Stesichorus seems to have dealt extensively with the hunt for the animal, as we know from a fragment listing the various hunters and contingents, which seems

³¹ For the myth of Scylla and her appearances in literature see Hopman 2013.

³² See Zardini 2009.

³³ For this poem see Carey 2015, 57–61.

preparatory to such a narrative.³⁴ This sets him apart not only from other archaic poets, who deal with the boar hunt in a few lines,³⁵ but also from the tragic poets, who could not have portrayed the hunt itself directly; it might nevertheless have been described in a messenger speech. The legend of Eriphyle offers considerable scope to both lyric and tragic poets, so it not surprising that alongside Stesichorus' poem of that name we find a tragedy *Eriphyle* by Sophocles, who also wrote at least one, and perhaps two, *Amphiaraus* plays, and an *Alcmeon*, which in turn was the name of two plays by Euripides. Yet here too we know little about any of these treatments.

We have rather more of Stesichorus' *Sack of Troy*, but this subject does not lend itself to dramatic portrayal. Tragedy is interested in the immediate aftermath of the sack – think of Euripides' *Hecuba* or *Trojan Women* – but it would exceed its technical capacity to depict the many events and extensive cast involved in the night of that city's destruction.³⁶ Stesichorus' poem begins, remarkably, with the menial figure Epeius, emphasising the glory that he won thanks to the building of the Horse;³⁷ Epeius is attested as the title-character of a Euripidean satyr-play, but not in tragedy. The *Games for Pelias* depicts another subject not easily represented in

³⁴ Stes. fr. 183 F., on which see Finglass 2012; cf. fr. 184, a description of activity by the boar which presumably comes from a narrative of the hunt.

³⁵ Hom. *Il.* 9.543–5; Bacchyl. 5.111–13.

³⁶ According to Podlecki 1971, 318–19, 'some of the details of Troy's capture which the Messenger tells at *Agam.* 524 ff. and Agamemnon's own recapitulation at 818 ff. (especially the description of the horse, 824–26), may well come from the *Iliouperis*, while the Messenger's account of the disastrous homeward journey at 649 ff. could be a summary of events told at length in the *Nostoi*'; but this is speculation. Similarly, Podlecki's assertion (*ibid.*) that Euripides' handling of the sacrifice of Polyxena, and the death of Heracles' children, owes a debt to Stesichorus goes beyond present evidence.

³⁷ Stes. fr. 100 F.; see Finglass 2013a, 2014e, 2015b, 2017a.

tragedy; Pelias does feature in fifth-century drama, but in connexion with either the rescue of his mother³⁸ or his death at the hands of his daughters.³⁹ A tragic representation of the myth of Geryon is conceivable, and a tragedy of that name by the third-century tragedian Nicomachus of Alexandria is known;⁴⁰ Diodorus Siculus remarks that ‘three-bodied Geryon’ was typical (together with centaurs) of monsters found in the theatre.⁴¹ But there is no evidence for plays on this subject by the classical tragedians.⁴²

For the above Stesichorean poems, then, we have no evidence for specific connexions between Stesichorus’ treatment and any tragic account. Podlecki is right to claim that many titles of classical tragedy ‘are based on the same legends as had been handled by Stesichorus’,⁴³ but that is only to be expected given a finite body of

³⁸ Sophocles *Tyro A* and *Tyro B*.

³⁹ Euripides’ *Daughters of Pelias* (so also plays of this name by Aphareus and Diphilus); perhaps Sophocles’ *Rootcutters* (*Rizotomoi*).

⁴⁰ Nicom. 127 F 3 *TrGF*; there was also a fourth-century comedy of that name by Ehippus (fr. 3–5 *PCG*). See Finglass 2020.

⁴¹ Diod. 4.8.4.

⁴² Podlecki 1971, 319 justifies his claim that ‘Euripides’ debt to Stesichorus seems to have been equally heavy [*sc.* as was Aeschylus’ debt]’ by reference to a supposed link between Heracles’ drinking bout with Pholus in the *Geryoneis* (fr. 22–4 F.) and the gluttonous Heracles of *Alceste*. But Heracles’ prodigious appetite was a standard enough characteristic of that mythological figure; there is no reason to think that a spectator of *Alceste* in 438 BC would think of the Pholus episode in Stesichorus. An attempt by Musso 1967, to demonstrate that since Aesch. fr. 74 *TrGF* depicts Geryon as three-bodied, and shows Heracles travelling to meet him in the Sun’s golden bowl, it must be influenced by Stesichorus’ *Geryoneis* and indeed could be considered a fragment of that poem, fails to take account of how such details would be found in many different poetic narratives of the myth.

⁴³ Podlecki 1971, 320.

myth; more than this is needed to establish a real relationship between Stesichorus and tragedy. After this process of elimination we are left with only four works: *Helen*, *Palinode*, *Thebais*, and *Oresteia*. Let us look briefly at each of these.

The *Helen*'s portrayal of Helen is too conventional for us to identify connexions with tragedy; but one aspect of the poem is perhaps worth highlighting. It is likely that in Stesichorus' poem, the young Helen was abducted by Theseus, and bore him Iphigenia; she transferred the baby to her sister Clytemnestra to bring up as her own child.⁴⁴ Iphigenia was probably sacrificed later in the poem by the Greeks on the way to recover Helen.⁴⁵ Both Sophocles and Euripides would later exploit the dreadful irony that one sister's crime led to the killing of the other sister's daughter, and that a father had to sacrifice his daughter to recover his brother's wife.⁴⁶ In Stesichorus we find another painful paradox: a daughter is sacrificed in order to put right the offence of her mother.⁴⁷ The parties to the sacrifice would not have known about this relationship – indeed, the chief sacrificer, Agamemnon, thought that she was his own daughter – but the mother would have known it only too well; the daughter is herself the product of the mother's chequered sexual past. The tragic paradox in Stesichorus is perhaps even greater than the one that we find in the tragedians. But we are a long way from being able to say that Stesichorus' treatment had an influence on tragedy here; this kind of ingenious paradox could have occurred independently to thoughtful people scrutinising the details of a myth. For the same

⁴⁴ Stes. fr. 86 F.

⁴⁵ See Finglass 2015a, 94; the attention evidently paid to Iphigenia's genealogy strongly suggests that she played some part in the poem beyond simply being born, and there is nothing else that Iphigenia could do except be sacrificed.

⁴⁶ See Finglass 2007a on Soph. *El.* 539, citing Eur. *El.* 1041–5, *Or.* 658–9, *IA* 1201–2.

⁴⁷ See Finglass 2015a, 96–7.

reason, it is not clear that an audience, on hearing the tragic passages, would have connected them with Stesichorus.

The *Palinode* is our first evidence for a Helen who did not go to Troy at all, but was magically transported to Egypt and kept safe there until the end of the war; this was the version used by Euripides in his *Helen*, and mentioned at the end of his *Electra*.⁴⁸ It would be hypercritical to say that Euripides took this highly distinctive myth from anywhere other than Stesichorus: here, then, we at last have some tangible evidence of a connexion between Stesichorus and tragedy. Unfortunately, the almost total loss of the *Palinode* prevents us from saying for certain anything else of value about Euripides' use of the poem. What follows, then, is a hypothesis that falls well short of proof, but still perhaps worth venturing. Somewhere Stesichorus depicted a visit to Egypt by the Athenian warrior Demophon on his way home from Troy; it is quite likely that this visit took place in the *Palinode*, and that Demophon during his visit was accompanied by the seer Calchas.⁴⁹ If this is correct, Demophon might have played a role in the poem similar to that of Teucer in Euripides' *Helen*: a visitor who anticipates Menelaus' arrival and acts as a foil to him. And Calchas might have been put to use in a manner similar to that of Euripides' Theonoe: a prophetic individual able to bring some certainty to the confusion caused by Helen's remarkable tale. But this suggestion piles hypothesis on hypothesis, and is vulnerable to the charge of *petitio principii*: if we reconstruct Stesichorus' poem by using Euripides' play as a template, of course it will seem as if Euripides was engaging with Stesichorus. We

⁴⁸ Eur. *El.* 1280–3.

⁴⁹ See Stes. fr. 90.15–30 F. with Finglass 2013b, which argues tentatively for these points in detail; further discussion in D'Alessio 2013, Mancuso 2013, Bowie 2015.

cannot rely on this as anything like a certain, or even probable, instance of a tragedian putting Stesichorus to use.

Only one scene from the *Thebais* has survived: an attempt at reconciliation by Oedipus's wife between her sons.⁵⁰ This at first sight is remarkably similar to Euripides' *Phoenissae*, where Jocasta tries to mediate between Eteocles and Polynices.⁵¹ But there are many differences. In Stesichorus, one brother takes the kingdom, the other Oedipus' property, whereas in Euripides, the pair agree to rule in alternate years, and Eteocles refuses to give up the throne at the expiry of his first term.⁵² In Stesichorus it is almost certain that the Queen is not Oedipus' mother, and hence that Eteocles and Polynices are not Oedipus' half-brothers. Euripides might allow an incestuous wife to retain a position of moral and political authority within her family and the state, but it is hard to imagine an archaic poet making light of such a taboo.⁵³ Stesichorus' Oedipus is probably dead: that is the natural motivation for the situation, in which the division of his property is at stake.⁵⁴ In Euripides, however, he is still alive. And in Stesichorus, the Queen's intervention takes place shortly before

⁵⁰ Stes. fr. 97 F.

⁵¹ Eur. *Phoen.* 261–637.

⁵² Stes. fr. 97.218–24 F., Eur. *Phoen.* 69–76. We do not know how the settlement broke down in Stesichorus.

⁵³ In the earliest accounts Oedipus' wife and mother kills herself shortly after her marriage, without producing offspring; that is implied by Hom. *Od.* 11.271–80 (on which see Finglass 2014c, 358) and is explicit in the *Oedipodea* (fr. 1 *GEF*) and the Pisander scholium (*PEG* I 17–19). The first author to give Oedipus children from his incestuous relationship is Pherecydes (fr. 95 *EGM*), where however these children do not include Polynices and Eteocles; Pherecydes makes that pair (with Antigone and Ismene) his offspring from a subsequent, non-incestuous marriage. See further the introduction to Finglass 2017b.

⁵⁴ See Finglass 2014c, 364–5.

Polynices' departure for Argos, so well before the expedition of the Seven. Euripides, by contrast, makes no reference to any intervention by Jocasta at that time; the brothers themselves, as Jocasta tells us, arrange a mutual settlement out of fear for Oedipus' curses.⁵⁵ Jocasta intervenes once Polynices and his companions have launched their expedition and are about to attack Thebes. The curses from Oedipus just mentioned constitute yet another difference between the two poets. Included by Euripides, the curses seem to be absent from Stesichorus, who puts the focus on Tiresias' prophecy. If Oedipus' curses did feature in his poem, it is surprising that the Queen makes no mention of them in what is left of her speech, and instead concentrates throughout on negating Tiresias' predictions.⁵⁶ Finally, Jocasta in Euripides fails to achieve a reconciliation, even in the short term; the scene descends into angry stichomythia between her sons, who separate without reaching an agreement. Stesichorus' Queen is remarkably successful, at least for the present; her sons accept her division without further discussion.

This impressive array of differences does not mean that Stesichorus had no influence on Euripides here. We should not expect a tragic poet (and nor would an ancient audience) to have a single 'source' that he follows, or adapts, in the course of a scene or play. The very prominence of the Queen could be enough to connect the two versions: Euripides may have taken this idea from Stesichorus, and reapplied it in different circumstances in his own work. In terms of the audience's perspective, it is plausible that some spectators of *Phoenissae* were reminded of the Stesichorean scene, not least as that episode was prominently placed towards the beginning of its

⁵⁵ Eur. *Phoen.* 66–74.

⁵⁶ So Burnett 1988, 111: 'it is plain that no curse is in question, for it is specifically Teiresias's prophecy . . . , not some damaging word from Oedipus, that the queen hopes to render ineffective.'

poem. Moreover, once the link had been established via the figure of the Queen mediating between her sons, members of the audience might have been encouraged to reflect on the differences between the two versions. This would have made the association all the more productive, since the audience would have had to consider why Euripides had diverged from Stesichorus' account. So Euripides gives the role of mediator to the brothers' mother, as had Stesichorus, but his intended peacemaker (unlike Stesichorus') was a participant in incest, someone whose actions, although unwitting, might have been thought to exclude her from any such role. This underlines the very different attitude towards this fundamental aspect of the myth that we find in Euripides. And whereas Stesichorus' Queen at least enjoys some short-term success in persuading her sons to compromise, this only highlights the failure of Jocasta to achieve any kind of reconciliation between the warring parties.

Froma Zeitlin qualifies the suggestion that Euripides was influenced by Stesichorus here, arguing that 'while a fragment of the sixth-century poet Stesichorus indicates a likely precedent for Jocasta's active, mediating role between the brothers . . ., Euripides' emphasis on the maternal qualities of Jocasta and the tragic consequences of her passionate devotion are surely his own elaboration'.⁵⁷ Zeitlin says 'surely', but unless she has got hold of a very exciting papyrus it is not clear how she can be so sure. Stesichorus' Queen dominates the action in the *Thebais* fragment with a speech that shows her passionate maternal concern: 'throughout she is direct and focussed; the speech has no digressions, despite its length, as if to emphasise the gravity of the situation, the intensity of her emotion, and the efficient manner in

⁵⁷ Zeitlin 2008, 329.

which she acts on that feeling.⁵⁸ She in no way falls short of Euripides' Jocasta in terms of maternal qualities. Moreover, it seems most unlikely that such a commanding figure will not have appeared later in the work, when the agreement that she so carefully engineers at the start of the poem falls apart, and when the fratricidal conflict that she had hoped to avert leads to the deaths of both her sons, and perhaps to her own death too. She will not have merely stood by as the catastrophe approaches, and during her appearances, whatever form these took, her maternal role and tragic situation will surely – to use Zeitlin's word – have been paramount. We cannot prove that this inspired aspects of Euripides' portrayal of Jocasta, but it is an enticing hypothesis; if we had more of Stesichorus' work we would probably be able to posit further links.⁵⁹

The tragic nature of Stesichorus' *Thebais* is well brought out by Burnett's eloquent appreciation:

In this poem . . . the notion of the helplessness of all mortality in the face of destiny is coupled with another, that of the flawed nature of even the greatest of humankind . . . This is not a poetic impulse typical of epic compositions; instead it is close to that of Attic tragedy. Here is a prototype of the tragic principal, a figure of august presumption, forewarned but blindly preparing the grief she would avoid. Here is a model for the tragic episode, a decision that provides the germ of an entire saga.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Finglass 2015a, 91, citing in addition Burnett 1988, 113: 'the lines reflect the mental dynamism of a woman engaged in making a crucial decision while under the pressure of strongest emotion'.

⁵⁹ See further Swift 2015, who notes similarities between the use of the lot as a means of dividing Oedipus' inheritance in Stesichorus (fr. 97.218–52, with Finglass 2013c) and in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*.

⁶⁰ Burnett 1988, 129.

Burnett is right to emphasise this tragic dimension; nevertheless, her language might lead us astray. Referring to Stesichorus' Queen as a 'prototype of the tragic principal' makes her seem a figure merely preparatory to characters drawn by poets not even born when Stesichorus' choruses were singing. Our admiration of the tragic elements in Stesichorus, and the links between Stesichorus and tragedy, should not cause us to think of Stesichorus merely as a forerunner to other people's work. If Euripides and other tragedians were inspired by aspects of his poetry, it does not follow that they improved on what they found.

We are left with Stesichorus' *Oresteia*, the very poem that Meyer and Murray focussed on all those years ago,⁶¹ where the similarities with tragedy are unmistakable. Moreover, we have the advantage of a second-century papyrus unavailable to those earlier scholars – a papyrus not of Stesichorus' poem, but of an anonymous scholarly text composed between c. 150 BC and c. AD 100, which provides the earliest surviving discussion of Stesichorus' relationship to the tragedians.⁶² The first passage that we will consider, however, comes from one of the quoted fragments. Stesichorus' Clytemnestra has a dream, from which the following two lines are preserved:

τᾱι δὲ δράκων ἐδόκησε μολεῖν κάρα βεβρωτῶμένος ἄκρον,
ἐκ δ' ἄρα τοῦ βασιλεὺς Πλεισθενίδας ἐφάνη.

A snake seemed to come to her, the crest of its head covered in gore, and then, out of it, appeared a prince of the line of Plisthenes.

Stes. fr. 180 F.

⁶¹ The most interesting account of this poem is still Ferrari 1938; see also Stephanopoulos 1980, 133–9.

⁶² P.Oxy. 2506, published by Page 1963; For the nature of this text see further Finglass 2014a, 81.

The snake probably represents Agamemnon, the king Orestes. Plutarch, who quotes these lines and knew their context, took them as an example of how a criminal conscience which had been bold enough before the deed is subsequently overcome by fear:⁶³ this suggests interest in Clytemnestra's psychology and motivation. Similarly in Aeschylus, Clytemnestra dreams that she gave birth to a snake, put it in swaddling clothes, and offered it her breast; the snake bites the breast and draws forth a gout of blood; Orestes identifies himself with the snake, and interprets the dream to mean that he will kill his mother.⁶⁴ Sophocles' Clytemnestra also has a dream, though that play banishes the snake.⁶⁵ Both the tragedians use the dream to motivate Clytemnestra sending her daughter to Agamemnon's tomb to placate his ghost;⁶⁶ this too is probably a Stesichorean device, since we know, thanks to the papyrus, that in his poem Orestes is recognised by means of a lock of hair (a motif used by Aeschylus and twisted in different ways by Euripides and Sophocles).⁶⁷ This implies an offering by Orestes at his father's tomb, as in the tragedians; it also implies recognition at the tomb by a family member friendly to him, possibly his sister (again, similarly in tragedy). Stesichorus included the Nurse, as did Aeschylus in his *Choephoroe*.⁶⁸ But she is also found in Pindar, Pherecydes, and mid-sixth century art, either saving the

⁶³ Plut. *De Sera Numinis Vindicta* 554f–555a.

⁶⁴ Aesch. *Cho.* 523–53.

⁶⁵ Soph. *El.* 410–27.

⁶⁶ See Finglass 2007a on Soph. *El.* 410.

⁶⁷ Stes. fr. 181a.11–13 F., Aesch. *Cho.* 164–204, Soph. *El.* 899–915, Eur. *El.* 509–29.

⁶⁸ Stes. fr. 179 F., Aesch. *Cho.* 730–82.

young Orestes or assisting him on his return;⁶⁹ and Stesichorus' Nurse, with her aristocratic name Laodamia, is likely to have been a rather different creation from the lowly character of Aeschylus' Cilissa. Stesichorus' Laodamia might have recognised Orestes; compare how Odysseus is recognised by his nurse Eurycleia.⁷⁰

In Stesichorus Apollo gives Orestes his bow, as is discussed by the author of the papyrus:⁷¹

15 ..]. Ε[ὺ]ριπίδης δὲ τὸ τ[όξον
 τὸ Ὀρέστου ὅτι ἐστὶν δε[δο—
 μέ]νον αὐτῷ δῶρον πα[ρὰ
 τ]οῦ Ἀπόλλωνος· παρ' ᾧ [μέν
 γ]ὰρ λέγεται· δὲ τὸ ξα μ[οι
 κ]ερουλκά, δῶρα Λοξίου, οἷς εἶ—
 20 π'] Ἀπόλλων μ' ἐξαμύ[νας]θαι
 θ]εός (Eur. *Or.* 268–9)· παρὰ δὲ Στησιχ[όρω]ι· τό—
 ξα] τάδε δώσω παλά—
 μα]ισιν ἐμαῖσι κεκασμένα
 ..]. [ἐ]πικρατέως βάλλειν·

Euripides included the bow of Orestes that is given to him as a gift from Apollo, since in his work come the words 'Give me the horned bow, the gift of Loxias, with which Apollo said that he would ward the goddesses away from me'. And in

⁶⁹ Pind. *P.* 11.17–18, Pher. fr. 134 *EGM*, and a metope from the temple of Hera at Foce del Sele; see Finglass 2007b on Pind. *P.* 11.17.

⁷⁰ Hom. *Od.* 19.467–75.

⁷¹ Apollo's gift to Orestes of his bow was already known before the publication of the papyrus, however, thanks to a scholion on Euripides (= fr. 181 F.).

Stesichorus: ‘I will give you this bow, excellent in my hands, . . . to shoot with power.’

Stes. fr. 181a.14–24 F.

The anonymous scholar compares the gift of the bow in Stesichorus with the request of the maddened Orestes in Euripides’ play for exactly that weapon; we may compare in addition Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, where Apollo himself brandishes his bow against the Erinyes.⁷² The gift of the bow in Stesichorus implies the pursuit of the Erinyes; the bow is a defence against them in the two tragedians, and gods do not hand over their weapons to mortals for no reason. The presence of the Erinyes implies a morally problematic matricide,⁷³ and this too is characteristically tragic. The enticement of Iphigenia to Aulis and her subsequent sacrifice feature in Stesichorus, as they do in the *Cypria*, not to speak of later texts;⁷⁴ this event supplies Clytemnestra with perhaps her most powerful justification for the killing of her husband. These isolated details do not just correspond to similar isolated details in tragedy; they build up a picture of a poem with a profound interest in the moral consequences of the matricide and Clytemnestra’s character and motivation.⁷⁵ So when Ferrari writes ‘if already in Stesichorus the matricide implies the persecution by the Erinyes, that leads us to

⁷² Aesch. *Eum.* 179–84.

⁷³ Thus Garvie 1986, xxi.

⁷⁴ Stes. fr. 181a.25–7 F. (the text refers only to Iphigenia’s enticement in Euripides before it breaks off, but it is clear that it would have gone on to state that the same event featured in Stesichorus), *Cypria* arg. 8 *GEF*, Soph. fr. 305 *TrGF*, Eur. *El.* 1020–3, *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

⁷⁵ Kurke 2013, 124–5 misses the interest implied in Clytemnestra’s motivation in these passages, although her point that later treatments, such as Pindar’s and Aeschylus’, should not be regarded as simple reflexes of Stesichorus’, is well taken.

believe that it must have appeared to the poet as a crime (even if this problem will acquire its decisive importance only in tragedy)', he is right only up until the beginning of the parenthesis.⁷⁶ Similar discrimination is required when we consider Ferrari's description of the characterisation of Stesichorus' Clytemnestra:

Certainly an already complex figure, since we must remember that Stesichorus referred to the sacrifice of her daughter as a means of justifying her, even if she is not investigated to the core of her complicated psychology, as she is presented to us in the original creation of Aeschylus. A figure already potentially rich in fertile dramatic seeds, such as the motif of the dream which puts to the fore the author of the crime and the killing, even if we must consider that she is depicted in powerful and vigorous glimpses. A figure, finally, perhaps still characterised by a certain archaic rigidity, but capable of exerting a fascination on later poets.⁷⁷

This deftly painted picture of Clytemnestra well brings out the tragic aspects of her character, and in particular the interest that Stesichorus takes in her motivation,

⁷⁶ Ferrari 1938, 24: 'Se già presso Stesicoro il matricidio implicava la persecuzione delle Erinni, ciò ci induce a supporre che esso doveva apparire al poeta come una colpa (anche se questo problema acquisterà solo con la tragedia la sua importanza decisiva)'.

⁷⁷ Ferrari 1938, 21: 'Figura certamente già complessa, se dobbiamo ammettere che aducesse a sua discolpa il sacrificio della figlia, anche se non ancora scrutata al fondo della sua complicata psicologia, come ci si presenta nell'originale creazione di Eschilo. Figura già potenzialmente ricca di germi drammatici fecondi, come il motivo del sogno che pone a fronte l'autrice del delitto e l'ucciso, anche se dobbiamo ritenere che fosse delineata a scorci potenti e vigorosi. Figura, infine, forse ancora atteggiata a una certa rigidità arcaica, ma capace di esercitare suggestione sui poeti posteriori.'

which, although it does not necessarily excuse her actions, nevertheless encourages the audience to engage imaginatively with the question of what drove her to act as she did. But like Burnett as cited above, Ferrari uses unhelpfully developmental language, as if all that Stesichorus could do was to anticipate a later form of literature, and as if the mere fact that he was earlier than Greek tragedy meant that his characters could not show depths and subtleties mysteriously reserved for that later genre alone. Rather than see in the lyric Clytemnestra mere ‘seeds’ that would achieve fruition only decades later, we should recognise that Stesichorus was just as able as Aeschylus to delineate a passionate woman capable of a terrible response in the face of enormous provocation.⁷⁸ The fragments hint that Stesichorus’ intention was indeed along these lines.⁷⁹

Still, once we dispense with the developmental model, Ferrari’s analysis of Clytemnestra and of the poem as a whole remains most penetrating and evocative. We may briefly contrast a more recent, and more often cited, piece by Neschke, who claims that ‘the most important modification introduced by Stesichorus consists in the fact that the whole responsibility for the killing of Agamemnon is placed on

⁷⁸ The prejudice that tragedy is superior to lyric in exploring this kind of psychological complexity lies behind the willingness of many scholars to claim that Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is earlier than Pindar’s *Pythian Eleven*, on the ground that Pindar could not have shown such fascination with Clytemnestra’s motivation if he had not been aware of Aeschylus’ play; see Finglass 2007b, 11–17.

⁷⁹ Stesichorus’ interest in the inner psychology and motivation of this apparently unappealing figure might be compared with his approach to Geryon, another ‘monster’ (albeit of a different kind) whose character is nevertheless explored by Stesichorus in such a way that the audience feels sympathy for him (see e.g. Finglass 2018c). We cannot tell whether an audience would have gone as far as to show sympathy for Stesichorus’ Clytemnestra, but they would at least have been confronted by her side of the story.

Clytemnestra. Stesichorus' entire poem bears witness to the poet's intention to blame the queen and to excuse Agamemnon; the sacrifice of Iphigenia is presented as a pious act of the king obedient to the demand of the goddess Artemis, who compensates the king by saving his daughter'.⁸⁰ Yet we know that in Stesichorus Iphigenia was summoned to Aulis by deceit – hardly a sign that her sacrifice was morally uncomplicated. So too Neschke does not take account of the presence of the Erinyes, who would be otiose in a poem where the matricide was unproblematic.⁸¹

Caution is in order when we associate Stesichorus' poem with tragedy. The earlier presentation of the story in the *Odyssey*, which downplays the aspects of the story discussed above, reflects the particular aims of its author, who did not want to linger on the mechanics of Orestes' vengeance or its consequences; his intention was to make Orestes a suitable figure for Telemachus' emulation. We cannot conclude that such information was not already in circulation at the time of that poem's composition. And indeed, we are told by the fourth-century scholar Megacledes that Stesichorus' poem owed much to a work by the lyric poet Xanthus.⁸² Xanthus' poem, as Aelian remarks (probably himself drawing on Megacledes), included Electra, who was given that name via a false etymology because she was growing old unwedded.⁸³

⁸⁰ Neschke 1986, 296: 'la modification la plus importante introduite par Stésichore, consiste dans le fait que toute la responsabilité du meurtre d'Agamemnon se pose sur Clytemnestre. Le récit *entier* de Stésichore témoigne de l'intention du poète de culpabiliser la reine et de disculper Agamemnon: le sacrifice d'Iphigénie se présente comme un acte pieux du roi obéissant à une demande de la déesse Artémis qui recompense le père en sauvant la fille.'

⁸¹ Nevertheless, the complete loss of the Stesichorean matricide is particularly grievous for our appreciation of the poem.

⁸² Stes. fr. 171 F.

⁸³ Xanthus fr. 700 *PMG*.

That fascinating detail implies a greater focus on the impact of Agamemnon's death on his family than we find in Homer. At the very least Xanthus' Electra is left distraught by her father's death, and thus presumably hostile to her mother; that mother might even have prevented her from marrying, to punish her or to avoid the prospect of a potential avenger, in the form of Electra's husband or son. The familial tensions familiar from tragedy, and probably present in Stesichorus, can thus be traced to an even earlier source. Xanthus did not make it into the canon of lyric poets, but his work was apparently known in the fourth century to Megaclides; we may guess that the tragedians knew it, too. This complicates any attempt to tease assess Stesichorus' distinctive impact on fifth-century tragedians.

A pessimist might conclude that aside from the *Oresteia*, the *Thebais*, and the *Palinode*, hard evidence that the tragedians interacted with Stesichorus is scarce, and that even in those three poems we cannot do much more than identify similarities without saying much of literary, as opposed to literary historical, significance. But such a view is excessively sceptical, and places too much emphasis on what we do not have as opposed to what we do. The explicit connexions are indeed few, so few that the kind of sweeping claims cited at the start of this piece cannot be justified. But there are connexions nonetheless: as well as the *Oresteia*'s impact on Aeschylus and the later tragedians, we have the relationship between the *Thebais* fragment and Euripides' *Phoenissae*, and between the *Palinode* and Euripides' *Helen*. In each case, members of the audience familiar with the Stesichorean version would probably have achieved a more profound appreciation of the tragedies that they were watching thanks to their knowledge of Stesichorus and consequent understanding of how the tragedian had interacted with his work. Moreover, it is intriguing to note that our discussion has time and again been dominated by tragic women: Clytemnestra in the

Oresteia, the Queen in the *Thebais*, Helen in the *Helen* and *Palinode*. There were tragic women before Stesichorus, but the prominence that he gives to them, and to others such as Althaea, or to Geryon's mother Callirhoe, could have inspired the tragedians just as much as the portrayal of women in Homer did. In other words, we must be open to the fascinating possibility that Stesichorus was a crucial early antecedent for the representation of strong-minded women in Greek tragedy.

- EGM* R. L. Fowler (ed.), *Early Greek Mythography*, 2 vols. (Oxford 2000–13).
- GEF* M. L. West (ed.), *Greek Epic Fragments from the Seventh to the Fifth Centuries BC* (Cambridge, MA and London 2003).
- H–C P. A. Hansen and I. C. Cunningham (eds.), *Hesychii Alexandrini Lexicon. Volumen IV. T–Ω* (Sammlung griechischer und lateinischer Grammatiker 11/4; Berlin and New York 2009).
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- TrGF* *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*. Vol. 1
Didascaliae Tragicae, Catalogi Tragicorum et
Tragoediarum, Testimonia et Fragmenta
Tragicorum Minorum (ed. B. Snell, 2nd ed. rev.
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- (2014d), commentary on fr. 187–369, *ibid.* 531–57.
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